

Gaming Commission chief vows to go slowly on casinos

Crosby hoping to avoid mistakes

By Mark Arsenault | GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 20, 2012

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Stephen P. Crosby says he wants to use the casino development process to leverage the common good.

Massachusetts gambling regulators will not open the sweepstakes for the state's three casino licenses for at least another nine to 18 months, according to Stephen P. Crosby, chairman of the potent state Gaming Commission, a new board that will pick the winners and losers among casino proposals across the state.

Not until that time, he said at a gambling forum yesterday, would the commission be prepared to issue the request for proposals that would launch the competition.

Of all the temptations the members of the Gaming Commission must resist, the first is the temptation to rush, Crosby said at the event, sponsored by the commercial real estate trade association NAIOP Massachusetts. The forum, at the Westin Boston Waterfront, drew several hundred people.

Taking it slow is a theme Crosby has struck since Governor Deval Patrick, a

Democrat, chose him last month as the first appointee to the five-member Gaming Commission. The other members will be named in the coming weeks.

Crosby is dean of the McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and a veteran of the Republican administrations of Governors Paul Cellucci and Jane Swift.

Stepping slowly into the world of Las Vegas-style casino gambling should help the state avoid the corruption and missteps that can undermine public confidence in the process of awarding lucrative development rights, said Crosby. The legislation that legalized casino gambling in Massachusetts, which Patrick signed in November, authorizes up to three resort-style casinos, to be spread among three geographic regions, and one slot parlor, which could be built in any region.

Some had criticized Crosby for agreeing to appear at a forum cohosted by a casino lobbyist. One of the forum's sponsors was ML Strategies, the lobbying firm that is representing casino mogul Steve Wynn in his effort to build a casino in Foxborough. But Crosby said that he had consulted the State Ethics Commission before deciding to speak at the forum, and that it presented an opportunity for him to include casino interests in a broader public discussion about how the industry can benefit the state.

During yesterday's speech, Crosby laid out two central goals for the gambling commission.

First, do no harm.

“If we can avoid terrible negatives, then I will feel good,” said Crosby, who added dryly, “It’s a modest aspiration.”

Not every state has managed to reach that modest goal. Pressure on public officials in Pennsylvania to move quickly to approve casinos contributed to widespread problems there, Crosby said. A grand jury in Pennsylvania found evidence of rampant patronage, political horse-trading, and alleged mob ties in the casino industry.

At a minimum, Crosby said, residents of Massachusetts need to be comfortable that development rights will be awarded fairly and honestly.

His second goal is a bit loftier: to use the casino development process “to leverage the common good.”

He estimates that casino companies are prepared to invest as much as \$4 billion in total to develop their projects in Massachusetts. He wants to investigate whether the investments can be designed to also enhance existing tourism sites, revitalize downtrodden areas, improve transportation, and provide other public benefits.

Casino development “is going to happen,” said Crosby, “so let’s be sure we do it in a way that minimizes the public harm, but see if there’s a way to do it that maximizes the public good.”

In laying out the Commission’s charge under the law, Crosby said the deciding voice of local communities on casino projects will be sacrosanct. No casino proposal will be eligible for a license unless voters in the host community - or, in big cities, the voting ward in which the project would be

located - endorse the proposal at the ballot box.

“We are irrelevant until the town or the ward has spoken,” said Crosby.

Development proposals will be judged against one another on a host of criteria, some of them subjective, such as the quality of the design of the building, and how well the project fits with its surroundings, he said.

“There is nothing that says he or she with the deepest pocket wins,” said Crosby, who took several questions and then left the forum before the other speakers.

One of those speakers, Troy Stremming, senior vice president for Ameristar Casinos, which intends to compete for casino development rights in Springfield, endorsed Crosby’s suggestion that the commission take its time.

“To get this done right, you need to move slowly,” Stremming said.